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Thinking with Christian Existentialism: Freedom in Burke's Logology and Berdyaev's Dostoevsky

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THINKING WITH CHRISTIAN EXISTENTIALISM: FREEDOM IN BURKE'S LOGOLOGY AND BERDYAEV'S *DOSTOEVSKY*

Abstract: Kenneth Burke's logology is a way of thinking about how to understand the use of language—what he calls "symbolic action"—and how to use language to make sense of various human practices, including interpretive acts. This is a dialectic in thought between rhetoric as language-use and interpretation as making-sense. In *The Rhetoric of Religion* Burke's theotropic logology uses theology to interpret symbolic action and symbolic action to interpret theology. Burke extends to other interpretive projects this same rhetorical-hermeneutic strategy of analogically translating words from one domain into another, from one meaning into another. This strategy is one way Burke thinks with other authors and their texts. The present essay uses some of Burke's published and unpublished work to show how he thinks with the Christian Existentialism of Nicholas Berdyaev and Fyodor Dostoevsky, especially on the topic of freedom. In his thinking with Berdyaev, Burke agrees with the Russian theo-philosopher about the importance of freedom. Indeed, the act of freedom, dramatized in Dostoevsky and described by Berdyaev, forms the very center of Burke's theory of symbolic action, his Dramatism and ultimately his Logology. Freedom is the condition of possibility for human action as opposed to mere motion, and *free will* is the necessary product of the cycle of terms implicit in the idea of hierarchical order presented in Burke's *The Rhetoric of Religion*.

Keywords: Kenneth Burke, Nicholas Berdyaev, Fyodor Dostoevsky, freedom, logology, theology, rhetorical hermeneutics.

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[*] See the Russian translation in *Literature of the Americas* 9 (2020).

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ПО СЛЕДАМ МЫСЛИ ХРИСТИАНСКОГО ЭКЗИСТЕНЦИАЛИЗМА: СВОБОДА В ЛОГОЛОГИИ БЕРКА И У ДОСТОЕВСКОГО В ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИИ БЕРДЯЕВА

Аннотация: Логология Кеннета Берка – попытка приблизиться к пониманию того, как люди используют язык (Берк называет это «символическим действием»), и как использовать язык, чтобы осмыслять различные аспекты человеческой деятельности, в том числе акт интерпретации. Это диалектическая мысль, в которой сходятся риторика как способ использования языка и интерпретация как акт осмысления. В «Риторике религии» Берк опирается на свою тяготеющую к религии логологию для толкования символических действий и на символические действия – для толкования теологии. Ту же риторико-герменевтическую стратегию, предполагающую перенос слов по аналогии из одной сферы в другую, от одного значения к другому, Берк проецирует и на другие виды интерпретации. Такая тактика – один из способов Берка думать вместе с другими авторами и их текстами. В настоящем эссе на материале некоторых опубликованных и неопубликованных работ Берка показано, как он следует за мыслью христианского экзистенциализма Николая Бердяева и Ф.М. Достоевского, особенно за их размышлениями о свободе. Следуя за мыслью Бердяева, Берк соглашается с утверждением русского религиозного философа о значимости свободы. Сам акт свободы, художественно изображенный Достоевским и описанный Бердяевым, составляет сердцевину сформулированной Берком теории символического действия, его драматизма и, в конечном счете, его логологии. Свобода – необходимое условие действия человека в противовес механическому движению, а *свободная воля* – логичный вывод из циркуляции понятий, которая заложена в иерархии, представленной Берком в «Риторике религии».

Ключевые слова: Кеннет Берк, Николай Бердяев, Ф.М. Достоевский, свобода, логология, теология/богословие, риторическая герменевтика

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"If we defined 'theology' as 'words about God,' then by 'logology' we should mean 'words about words.'" So begins Kenneth Burke's introduction to his 1961 book *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*. Burke goes on to argue ingeniously for a series of analogies between these two realms, developing thereby what might be called his rhetorical hermeneutics of thinking. By *rhetorical hermeneutics* I mean to suggest a dialectic in thought between rhetoric as language-use and interpretation as making-sense.[1] Burke's logology is a way of thinking about how to interpret the use of language—what he famously calls "symbolic action"—and how to use rhetoric to make sense of various human practices, including interpretive acts. In *The Rhetoric of Religion* Burke's theotropic logology uses theology to interpret symbolic action and symbolic action to interpret theology. More specifically, Burke places under the heading of rhetoric the whole subject of religion since "religious cosmogonies are designed . . . as exceptionally thoroughgoing modes of persuasion" for interpreting the universe, and he creatively uses statements in religion about the nature of God as "purely secular observations on the nature of *words*."[2] Emphasizing the latter interpretive strategy, Burke contends that "insofar as religious doctrine is verbal, it will necessarily exemplify its nature as verbalization; and insofar as religious doctrine is thorough, its ways of exemplifying verbal principles should be correspondingly thorough."[3] That is, studying words about God will provide us with many words about words.

In finding analogies between theology and logology, Burke remains agnostic concerning the truth of religious faith. "For regardless of whether the entity named 'God' actually exists outside his nature sheerly as key term in a system of terms, words 'about him' must reveal their nature

[1] See Mailloux, Steven. *Rhetoric's Pragmatism: Essays in Rhetorical Hermeneutics*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017. For additional examples and commentary, see *Reconceptualizing American Literary/Cultural Studies: Rhetoric, History, and Politics in the Humanities*, ed. William E. Cain. New York: Garland, 1996; *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies*, eds. James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein. New York: Routledge, 2001; *Майу, Стивен*. "Сравнение: первая встреча, этноцентризм и межкультурная коммуникация.", trans. D. Kharitonov. Ценности, каноны, цены, ed. Tatiana Venediktova. Moscow: Moscow University Press, 2005: 14–29 (In Russ.); Drong, Leszek. *Disciplining the New Pragmatism: Theory, Rhetoric, and the Ends of Literary Study*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007; and Mailloux, Steven. "Rhetoric." *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. Jeffrey R. Di Leo. London: Bloomsbury, 2019: 102–111.

[2] Burke, Kenneth. *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* [1961]. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970: v, 1.

[3] Ibid.: 1.

as words." The "linguistic analogue" to the concept of God can be found, according to Burke, "in the nature of any name or title" that "sums up a manifold of particulars under a single head (as with the title of a book, or the name of some person or political movement). Any such summarizing word is functionally a 'god-term."[4] He elaborates this analogy elsewhere by summing up his approach: "Whereas Anselm propounded the 'ontological necessity for the existence of God,' we base our position on the analogous linguistic necessity for the existence of god-terms. . . . And insofar as man, the word-using animal, approached nonverbal nature in terms of his humanly verbalizing nature, is there not a sense in which *nature* must be as much of a linguistically inspirited thing for him as *super-nature*?"[5]

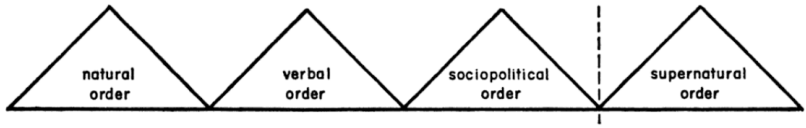
Here Burke gestures toward the larger logological framework of terminological orders across which human beings make analogies in their symbol-using. He explains that "there are four realms to which words may refer": natural, verbal, socio-political, and supernatural. Humans are constantly borrowing words from one realm to refer in another, moving, for instance, from the socio-political to the natural ("the king of the jungle" for lion) and back again, the natural to the socio-political ("the lion in winter" for Henry II of England). But Burke especially emphasizes the borrowings for the supernatural order: "Even if one assumed it as beyond question that there really *is* a realm of the supernatural, nevertheless our *words* for the discussion of this realm are necessarily borrowed by analogy from our words for the other three orders: the natural, the socio-political and the verbal (or the symbolical in general, as with the symbol-systems of music, the dance, painting, architecture, the various specialized scientific nomenclatures, etc.)."[6] Burke visually represents this particular point about

[4] Ibid.: 2–3.

[5] Burke, Kenneth. "What Are the Signs of What? A Theory of 'Entitlement.'" *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966: 378. Though still thinking analogically, Burke had earlier defined *god-terms* a bit differently as "names for the ultimates of motivation" and gave the examples of "freedom" and "necessity," describing the concepts as the "two primary generalizations that characterize the quality of motives." A few pages later he notes that interpretations of action can be revised by freely choosing to change the scenic circumference of an action, giving an example from *The Brothers Karamazov*, where the mystic Alyosha "'negates' the terms of the scene as Mitya interpreted it." Alyosha reads his brother's romance through the "higher synthesis" of transcendent religion. Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives* [1945]. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969: 74, 84–85.

[6] Burke, Kenneth. *Rhetoric of Religion*: 15.

terminological dependency with the vertical line in the following diagram[7] separating the supernatural from the other three realms:



In *The Rhetoric of Religion* Burke focuses on "the analogy between 'words' (lower case) and The Word (*Logos*, *Verbum*) as it were in caps."[8] The analogical translation again works both ways as secular words from the socio-political order are used in the supernatural order and then borrowed back from the supernatural to the aesthetic within the social (*gratis*, grace).

Burke extends to other interpretive projects this same rhetorical-hermeneutic strategy of analogically translating words from one location into another, from one meaning into another. Indeed, this strategy is one significant way Burke thinks with other authors and their texts. In the present essay I would like to use some of Burke's published and unpublished work to show how he thinks with the Christian Existentialism of Nicholas Berdyaev and Fyodor Dostoevsky, especially about the topic of freedom.

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In July 1956 the theologian Stanley Hopper of Drew University invited Burke to give a lecture in the school's Graduate Colloquium during the next academic year and also asked Burke to review *Christianity and the Existentialists* for the *Drew Gateway*. Burke accepted both invitations.[9] He proposed "Words and the Word" for his lecture, gave it in December 1956, and eventually revised it into the first chapter of *The Rhetoric of Religion*. The plan for the book review apparently did not go as well. There is still

[7] Reproduced from Burke, Kenneth. "What Are the Signs of What?" *Language as Symbolic Action*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966: 374. I thank Anthony and Michael Burke for permission to reproduce Burke's chart of terministic pyramids and to quote from Burke's unpublished material. I would also like to thank them and Julie Whitaker once again for their kind hospitality during my visits to the Burke summer home in Andover, New Jersey, as well as Jack and Linda Selzer for their support in making such visits possible.

[8] Burke, Kenneth. *Rhetoric of Religion*: 7.

[9] Stanley Hopper to Kenneth Burke, 16 July 1956, and Burke to Hopper, 27 July 1956, Kenneth Burke Papers, Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State University Libraries, State College.

a marked up copy of *Christianity and the Existentialists* in his personal library at the Burke family compound in Andover, New Jersey, and among his papers at the house are some typed pages and handwritten notes for a review of the book.[10] But Burke probably never completed the review. In any case no published version appeared in the *Drew Gateway* during the next few years.[11]

Burke begins his typescript comments in praise of metaphysics and theology, not as truthful accounts of ultimate realities but as "reasoned utterances [that] can be admired for their thoroughness or scope, their great dialectical finesse, the meditative note they bring to our problems of existence," and most notably "the enterprise they show in discovering just what does happen if one takes a set of key terms, and is exceptionally persistent in following where they lead." Burke argues that humans as symbol-using animals "can never become too sophisticated" in studying their own symbol-systems, "which play such a crucial role in guiding and misguiding." Logology is the name for such study as it turns back upon itself as words about words. "'Logologically' speaking, this word" *logology* is "to thoughts about language, what 'thought about thought' and 'self-consciousness' are to Aristotelian and Hegelian metaphysics respectively" (ts1).

For Burke, *Christianity and the Existentialists* is full of "logological wonders," which he goes on to describe in the remaining pages of the typescript. Some of these wonders involve explicit statements Existentialism makes about language and human existence; others are implicit proposals Burke teases out of Existentialist discourse through his rhetorical-hermeneutic strategy of translating philosophical words and assertions into his own vocabulary and logological arguments. Burke quotes Michalson's introduction, "Hereafter, a philosophy which does not deliberately retain in its method the distinction between reality as engaged by one's whole life and reality as thought, between attitude toward reality and content about reality, cannot be regarded as an existential *philosophy*."[12] Burke then asks,

[10] The nine-page typescript and additional handwritten notes are contained in an envelope at Andover marked "N19" and labeled "'Christianity & the Existentialists' notes." The pages of the typescript will hereafter be cited in the main text as "ts" followed by page number.

[11] There is also no such review in the "Philosophy" section of Burke, Kenneth. *Equipment for Living: The Literary Reviews of Kenneth Burke*, eds. Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2010.

[12] Michalson, Carl. "What Is Existentialism?" *Christianity and the Existentialists*, ed. Carl Michalson. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956: 5.

"Do we not here confront the basic methodological problem" that humans must inevitably confront as symbol-using animals? "Every 'philosophy' must, by its very nature as a philosophy, be a structure of words. Yet most of our empirical existence is non-verbal, or extra-verbal" (ts2). Burke goes on to develop this point by noting that "by 'existence,' the Existentialist presumably has in mind this disproportion between the non-verbal and the verbal (the verbal being the realm of 'essence,' as distinct from 'existence,' since the verbal is the realm of definition, with all its hazards)" (ts3).

Burke welcomes Michalson's paragraphs on "the special terminology that a philosophy may need" and gathers together the terms of Existentialist discourse: "'Humiliating consciousness of their ignorance . . . guilt and death . . . moral burden . . . wonder . . . curiosity . . . doubt . . . despair . . . hope of rescue . . . interior agony . . . anxiety . . .'" (ts4, ellipses in original). Burke then logologically observes that "such terms lead into talk of the 'galaxy of meanings,'" clustering around the term *existence*. Turning to the relation of Existentialism to Christianity, Burke wonders whether the absence of a chapter on Jean-Paul Sartre was an error and then quickly moves to the penultimate paragraph of the introduction, which reads in part:

> If a philosophy can ever do anything to prepare the way for the Christ in our culture today, will it not be the very philosophy which refuses to supplant him? Existentialism nurses an aching void, keeps the wounds of man open until an authentically healing agent can be applied. Existentialism sponsors what the poet Hölderlin called 'a holy emptiness' which turns its atheism into a wistful stretching out for reality, a noumenal hunger, a movement of the spirit which keeps a sensitive openness upward toward the God who must reveal Himself if He is to be known.[13]

Burke comments by translating Michalson's translation: we end here "on post-Kantian language, translating Hölderlin's 'holy emptiness' into 'noumenal hunger,' which perhaps [can] best be trabslated [sic] logologically: 'How see without seeing in terms of sight, how hear without hearing in terms of sound, etc.'? Or, in sum, how can the term-using animal see around the corner of his terminology?" (ts5). Such logological translations continue to appear throughout the remaining pages of Burke's typescript:

[13] Michalson, Carl. "What Is Existentialism?": 21–22.

Existentialism as philosophy can be read like Christian theology for what it says by analogy about the use and abuse of words.

After discussing Michalson's introduction, Burke takes up H. Richard Niebuhr's essay on the proto-Existentialist, Sören Kierkegaard, "one of the most violently anti-religious writers of the nineteenth century and one of its devoutest Christians."[14] Here again Burke's rhetorical-hermeneutic strategy is to show the "great dialectical prowess of this turbulently scrupulous man" as Kierkegaard interprets human existence and deploys his own terminology to accomplish this interpretation. Niebuhr's essay emphasizes the paradoxical nature of Kierkegaard's anti-Hegelianism, and Burke logologically runs with these paradoxes. Burke quotes Niebuhr on Kierkegaard: "He reacted against the systematic thesis of Hegelianism with the antithesis of non-systematic thought; against the thesis that everything leads to synthesis with the antithesis that everything leads to antithesis; against the thesis that the idea objectifies itself with the antithesis that it subjectifies itself, etc."[15] Burke then comments: "noting logologically the ways whereby the concepts of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis all implicate one another, should we not hesitate to put our trust wholly in any one progression here [?]. . . . Where terms imply one another, so that we need but look long at any one of them to find the others lurking in it, can we not get the best results by deliberately taking various routes, rather than by trying to treat any one of them as a complete calculus?" (ts6). Burke's logological teasing out of the implications of terms would thus seem to be Hegelian and Kierkegaardian at the same time: Hegelian in its insistence on the dialectical development of terminology and Kierkegaardian in its anti-systematic skepticism regarding the direction of Hegel's specific dialectical thinking.

Moving onto Kierkegaard's ethical focus, Burke quotes Niebuhr's point about Kierkegaard's stress upon "personal existence as the clue to being" and his "insistence that the ethical question not only takes precedence over the metaphysical but can ethically never be abandoned in favor of the latter."[16] Burke logologically translates Kierkegaard's stance into his own Dramatistic terminology, arguing that the philosopher's ethics follows directly from his view of human beings as agents: "For the agent is one who acts (and the stress upon the ethical is implicit in the

[14] Niebuhr, H. Richard. "Sören Kierkegaard." *Christianity and the Existentialists*: 23.

[15] Ibid.: 25.

[16] Ibid.: 26.

idea of action, non-ethical, non-personal things being capable solely of moving or being moved, rather than of that essentially Dramatistic pair, action and passion)" (ts6). Here Burke is relying on the foundational opposition undergirding his entire philosophy of language, the opposition between *non-symbolic motion* and *symbolic action*, and on his influential Dramatistic Pentad: every *act* assumes an *agent* using an *agency* in a *scene* for a *purpose*. Logologically restated: the term *action* implies the five terms of the pentad, and each of the pentad's terms imply the others.[17]

Burke gives one more logological twist to his comments on Kierkegaard's ethical focus when he quotes Niebuhr's assertion that for this proto-Existentialist "the question is not what being is, but how I can become myself."[18] To this, Burke responds with his own rhetorical question: "But insofar as one 'becomes' himself by seeking to become a good Christian, do we not come upon symbol-using as a distinctive trait of action?" and then explains: "For insofar as Christianity is a doctrine, a message, an imitation guided by teaching, is it not fundamentally dependent upon words, at least as regards most people?" (ts6).[19] Unfortunately, the extant typescript ends with Burke's logological reading of Niebuhr's essay on Kierkegaard. To think further with Burke, I will need to turn more speculatively to Burke's handwritten notes and markings in the text and margins of Matthew Spinka's essay on Nicholas Berdyaev in *Christianity and the Existentialists*.

We can begin with the section headings used by Spinka: "Existence and the Realm of Spirit" with subheadings ("God," "Human Personality," and "Freedom), "Existential Reconstruction in Theology," and "The Ethics of Creativity." Spinka asserts that Berdyaev "derives his initial insights into philosophy and religion **from Dostoevsky instead of Kierkegaard.**"[20] Burke's usual reading practice included marking passages, writing words in the margin, indexing some of those words in his own index at the end of the book, writing out words and notes from the index on separate sheets

[17] Burke, Kenneth. "(Non-Symbolic) Motion/(Symbolic) Action." *Critical Inquiry* 4 (Summer 1978): 809–38; and Burke, Kenneth. *Grammar of Motives*: xv–xxiii.

[18] Niebuhr, H. Richard. "Sören Kierkegaard": 26.

[19] A few years earlier, Burke had thought in another way with Kierkegaard about Christianity, rhetoric, and the dialectic of terms; see Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives* [1950]. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969: 244–56, 265.

[20] Spinka, Matthew. "Nicholas Berdyaev." *Christianity and the Existentialists*: 60. I will use **bold highlighting** to indicate words underlined or circled in Burke's personal copy of *Christianity and the Existentialists*.

of paper, and then typing out passages and his more developed notes. Burke marked up the Spinka chapter on Berdyaev, indexed some marginalia, and copied out a very few words on a separate sheet. From these brief jottings we can see how Burke was beginning to think with Berdyaev by translating some of the philosopher's terms and concepts into his own.

For example, Burke circled the following passage that Spinka quotes from Berdyaev's *The Beginning and the End*:

> The **individual** is born within the generic process and belongs to the natural world. **Personality**, on the other hand, is a spiritual and ethical category. It is **not born of a father and mother**, it is created spiritually and gives actual effect to the divine idea of man. **Personality is not nature, it is freedom, and it is spirit.** It might be said that personality is not man as phenomenon, but man as noumenon, if such terminology had not too much of an epistemological flavour about it.[21]

We can easily see why Burke would find this passage interesting: Not only does Berdyaev do a little of his own logological thinking in remarking on the "flavour" of his chosen terminology; he also introduces a foundational opposition—*individual* versus *person*—that Burke can easily translate into his own logological perspective. Having written "individual as dist[inct] from person" next to the text quoted above, Burke repeats the phrase in his handwritten index at the end of the volume. Then in his sheet of handwritten notes he gives himself instructions: "cite Berdyaev's distinction btwn individual and personality . . . note how this wd look from standpoint of our definition . . . first: individuating principle of matter—the centrality of nervous system . . . then personality . . . it is 'freedom' . . . 'freedom' is in language and in particular the negativity of language."[22]

In these notes, Burke is analogizing Berdyaev's distinction with his own: individual is to person as individuating nervous system is to free human agent (and, we can add, as non-symbolic motion is to symbolic action). For Burke, freedom is actualized in human language-use, in symbolic action, and most dramatically in the linguistic use of the negative, the human ability to say, "no." He develops this argument at length in several

[21] Berdyaev, Nicholas. *The Beginning and the End: An Essay on Eschatological Metaphysics*, trans. R.M. French. London: Bles, 1952: 135–36; quoted in Spinka, Matthew. "Nicholas Berdyaev": 64.

[22] My ellipses. Some of Burke's handwriting is indecipherable, at least to this reader.

places throughout his work. For instance, among the analogies Burke sees between logology and theology, the negative plays a "major role," as he says in the first chapter of *The Rhetoric of Religion*, "On Words and the Word." There he explains his notion of the negative by comparing it with Henri Bergson's chapter on "The Idea of Nothing" in *Creative Evolution*.[23] "Surely this chapter is a major moment in the theory of language, for it helps one realize that the negative is a peculiarly linguistic marvel, and that there are no negatives in nature, every natural condition being positively what it is."[24] However, Burke's logological Dramatism lays the stress elsewhere. Bergson "begins with the *propositional* negative, as with a sentence like 'It is not . . . .' But Dramatistically (that is, viewing the matter in terms of 'action'), one should begin with the *hortatory* negative, the negative of command, as with the 'Thou shalt not's' of the Decalogue." He adds in passing that "Existentialists such as Heidegger and Sartre should certainly be examined quizzically for their tendency to 'reify' the negative, by starting from the quasi-substantive 'nothing' rather than from the moralistic 'no.'"[25] Burke goes on to remark that the hortatory negative is "basic to the sense of the ethical," and, as we have already seen, he logologically connects ethics closely with action and thus with freedom.[26]

I surmise that this concern with the linguistic negative and free action is also what draws Burke's interest to Berdyaev's notion of "meonic freedom," a term written down in Burke's index and notes along with a reference to the first page of Spinka's discussion of the concept:

> [Berdyaev] derives [the term] from Jacob Boehme, who speaks of the primeval **meonic void as the *Ungrund***. In the beginning . . . of the cosmogonic and theogonic processes, there existed **meonic freedom** which is interpreted as an urge to be. Because it was freedom, it contained within itself the possibility of both good and evil. **Freedom is, therefore,**

[23] Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell. New York: Henry Holt, 1911: 272–98.

[24] Burke, Kenneth. *Rhetoric of Religion*: 19.

[25] Ibid.: 20.

[26] Ibid.: 23. See also Burke, Kenneth. "A Dramatistic View of the Origins of Language and Postscripts on the Negative." *Language as Symbolic Action*: 419–44, which includes Burke's declaration that "Everything that can be said about 'God' has its analogue in something that can be said about *language*. And just as theorizing about God leads to so-called 'negative theology,' so theorizing about language heads in the all-importance of the Negative" (469–70).

> ***uncreated.*** . . . **[E]vil is nothing else than the abuse of freedom on the part of man, self-assertion, selfishness**.[27]

Burke not only circles these highlighted passages, he writes in the margins "freedom 'uncreated'" and "'meonic freedom'" with a page reference to a later discussion in the essay, where Spinka writes: "Berdyaev asserts that the world has **evolved from the primordial meonic non-being**, as did **freedom**."[28] Burke again writes in the margin, this time: "negative source of world." The phrase *negative source of world* is Burke's interpretive gloss and not a direct quote from the text. By naming primordial non-being as the "negative source" of the world and freedom, Burke seems to tie Berdyaev's *meonic freedom* to his own claims about the originary status of the hortatory negative.

Be that as it may, I'd like to push Burke's tentative thinking with Berdyaev (and my even more tentative thinking with Burke) a bit further. Burke's markings in another book still held in his personal library suggest we might extend this thinking beyond the philosophical and theological to the political. *Four Existentialist Theologians*, edited by Will Herberg, publishes selections from Berdyaev's writings including "Religion of the Spirit," "Personality," and "Master, Slave and Free Man." I'll just focus here on marked passages in Herberg's general introduction, which I will connect to some remarks on Dostoevsky and freedom. Herberg writes: "Nicolas Berdyaev's **ethic of meonic freedom** leads him to a social philosophy that in principle disparages **all fixed norms** and **institutions as 'objectivizations of the spirit**,' and yet advocates a form of **economic socialism** in the interests of freedom. In effect, Berdyaev distinguishes two types of socialism: '**collective socialism**, which is based on the supremacy of society and the state over personality . . . [and] **personalist socialism**, which is founded on the **absolute supremacy of the personality**, or each personality, over society and over the state.'"[29] This marked up passage is followed by another in which Berdyaev alludes to Dostoevsky's "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor": "The former [collective socialism] '**offers bread** and **takes away man's freedom'**; the latter [personalist socialism] '**offers**

[27] Spinka, Matthew. "Nicholas Berdyaev": 65.

[28] Ibid.: 68.

[29] Herberg, Will. "General Introduction." *Four Existentialist Theologians*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958: 14, quoting Berdyaev, Nicholas. *Slavery and Freedom*, trans. R.M. French. New York: Scribner's, 1944: 210. Again, I will use **bold highlighting** to indicate words underlined or circled in Burke's personal copy.

bread to all men while preserving their freedom for them and without alienating their conscience from them.'"[30] Of course, Berdyaev embraces the latter.

Herberg then draws out (and Burke highlights) the political implications of Berdyaev's promotion of personalist socialism. Such privileging of the individual person requires that the State "**has the duty** to **guarantee the free development of autonomous** life." This transmutation of socialist economics "**into the freedom** of the autonomous life" leads Herberg to claim that "Berdyaev's '**personalist socialism**' is, therefore, **basically anarchist, as indeed a philosophy of meonic freedom would require.**"[31] Whether Burke agrees with this conclusion is unclear, but, as we will see, a highlighted footnote to this marked passage will help explain a certain reservation Burke has about Berdyaev's theological anthropology.

First, though, let me turn to one more passage on Berdyaev from Herberg's introduction: "To Berdyaev, the **prime evil** is the objectivization, externalization, **'thingification' (*Verdinglichung*) of the spirit**; for him, free spirit is the only true reality and the only true good." Herberg adds that for Berdyaev, the human being, "as spirit, is **'theandric**,' **a 'potential God-man**,' for 'humanness **is divineness**.'"[32] Burke's circling of *theandric* repeats his attention to the same term in his markings and notes on *Christianity and the Existentialists*. Going back to that text for a moment: Spinka writes of Berdyaev's agreement with other Existentialists that "the highest goal to be attained by a life-time of strenuous endeavor," of "moral and spiritual struggle," is "**freedom from all external slaveries, social as well as individual**." Spinka explains further that "Berdyaev links up this concept of personality with the ancient Eastern Orthodox concept of **salvation as transformation of the human into the divine-human personality**."[33] For Berdyaev, human personality "is human only when it is **divine-human**. . . . Human personality is a theandric being."[34] Burke writes "divine human" in the margin and underlines its importance by including

[30] Herberg, Will. "General Introduction": 14, quoting Berdyaev, Nicholas. *Slavery and Freedom*: 210, with three parallel lines in the margin further highlighting this underlined passage.

[31] Herberg, Will. "General Introduction": 14–15.

[32] Ibid.: 18, quoting Berdyaev, Nicholas. *The Divine and the Human*, trans. R.M. French. London: Bles, 1949: 112, 125.

[33] Spinka, Matthew. "Nicholas Berdyaev": 64.

[34] Berdyaev, Nicholas. *Slavery and Freedom*: 48, 45 respectively, quoted in Spinka, Matthew. "Nicholas Berdyaev": 64.

a summary of the above passage in his index as "salvation as transforming of human into theandric."

In his book *Dostoevsky* Berdyaev also takes up the divine-human relation in emphasizing the dynamic, dramatic movement of Dostoevsky's thought, a movement that includes the dialectical development of "the antithesis of the God-man and the Superman [man-god]."[35] We will see here how Berdyaev thinks with Dostoevsky about this dialectic, especially in "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*, and then return one final time to Burke's thinking with Berdyaev.

In his foreword Berdyaev writes, "At the base of my notion of the world as I see it there has always lain the idea of liberty, and in this fundamental intuition of liberty I found Dostoevsky as it were on his own special ground." Dostoevsky played "a decisive part" in Berdyaev's spiritual life, and from early on the great Russian novelist stirred his soul "more than any other writer or philosopher." For Berdyaev, "people are always divided into 'dostoevskyites' and those to whom his spirit is foreign."[36] He saw Dostoevsky as "a great thinker and a great visionary as well as a great artist" and, most relevant to my point, "a dialectician of genius and Russia's greatest metaphysician." Berdyaev vividly explains: "For Dostoevsky ideas are fiery billows, never frozen categories; they are bound up with" the destinies of humanity, the world, and God. These ideas "determine those destinies. They are ontological; that is to say, comprise within themselves the very substance of being, and conceal a latent energy as destructive as dynamite—Dostoevsky shows how their explosion spreads ruin all around." But Berdyaev is quick to add that those ideas "have life-giving energy as well."[37]

Berdyaev's specific aim is to represent and examine Dostoevsky's spiritual side by exploring how he "shows us new worlds, worlds in motion, by which alone human destinies can be made intelligible." Berdyaev tries "to enter and explore in order to seize" what he calls Dostoevsky's "conception of the world," a conception that is dynamic in the highest degree.[38] In its dialectical development the internal contradictions of the novelist's work tend to disappear. Contrasting him to Tolstoy, Berdyaev

[35] Berdyaev, Nicholas. *Dostoevsky*, trans. Donald Attwater. Cleveland, OH: World Publishing, 1957: 202.

[36] Ibid.: 9.

[37] Ibid.: 11–12.

[38] Ibid.: 13.

argues that Dostoevsky "was much less concerned with God than with man and his destiny, with the riddle of the spirit; he was not haunted by theology but by anthropology."[39] Dostoevsky did not strive to solve the divine problem but the problem of humanity, which is the problem of the spiritual, the problem of freedom, the problem ultimately of the Christian.

"Dostoevsky unveiled a new spiritual world: he restored to man the spiritual depth of which he had been bereft when it was removed to the inaccessible heights of a transcendent plane." Humanity had been deprived of its spiritual depth and was left only with its secular, materialist surface. "The Orthodox Church began this deprivation when she relegated spiritual life to another and transcendent world. . . . This process could only lead to positivism, gnosticism, and materialism, that is, to the utter despiritualization" of human beings and their world. Dostoevsky, "as bearer of a great message from the spirit, was in reaction from all these tendencies," bringing back spiritual life to within human beings, making them spiritual creatures again. He "put no limits or boundaries to experience of the spirit" and "the scope of its activities could be observed in the immanence of their interior movement." Now God could be reached *in* humanity and *by* human beings. This is the "road of freedom which Dostoevsky put forward, and at its end is Jesus Christ," in the very depths of the human soul. Though Berdyaev believed that Dostoevsky "never attained a total unity" in his religious conceptions, that he "failed to resolve their contradictions completely," it was still the case that "this new free religion represented something absolute for him." Dostoevsky's spiritual thinking about freedom culminated in "the ideological dialectic of the 'Legend of the Grand Inquisitor.'" [40]

Dostoevsky was intensely fascinated with the question of what happens to human beings when, having freedom, they turn aside "to arbitrary self-will."[41] For Dostoevsky, "freedom is the supreme good": humans cannot renounce it without renouncing themselves and ceasing to be human. To the very end of his writing career, and most dramatically in "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor," Dostoevsky "refused to rationalize human society and repudiated all attempts to exalt happiness, reason, and well-being above liberty."[42] He "found that the road to Christ led through

[39] Ibid.: 24.

[40] Ibid.: 36–37.

[41] Ibid.: 46.

[42] Ibid.: 56.

illimitable freedom, but he showed that on it also lurked the lying seductions of the Antichrist and the temptation to make a god of man." Berdyaev brackets Dostoevsky with Nietzsche in their shared rejection of traditional European Humanism, but Dostoevsky remained a Christian, albeit of a new kind. "For Nietzsche there was neither God nor man but only this unknown man-god," the over- or super-man. "For Dostoevsky there was both God and man: the God who does not devour man and the man who is not dissolved in God but remains himself throughout all eternity." This means for Berdyaev that Dostoevsky epitomizes "a Christian in the deepest sense of the word."[43]

For Dostoevsky, there is no humanity without freedom, and he conducted all his thinking on humanity and its destiny "as the dialectic of the destiny of freedom."[44] But in Berdyaev's Dostoevsky, there are two sorts of freedom and not just one: "the first to choose between good and evil, the last in the heart of good—an irrational freedom and a freedom within reason." The first freedom is that of Adam, the second that in Christ. "The truth shall make men free, but they must freely accept it and not be brought to it by force. Our Lord gives man the final liberty, but man must first freely have cleaved to him." In the words of the Grand Inquisitor, "Thou didst desire man's free love, that he should follow thee freely, a willing captive." Berdyaev explains that "it is this free choice of Christ that constitutes the Christian's dignity and gives meaning to his act of faith, which is above all a free act." Human dignity and "the dignity of faith require the recognition of two freedoms, freedom to choose the truth and freedom in the truth."[45]

Freedom is not the same as goodness or truth. But "free goodness, which alone is true, entails the liberty of evil. That is the tragedy that Dostoevsky saw and studied, and it contains the mystery of Christianity." This mystery's "dialectic works out thus: Free goodness involves the freedom of evil; but freedom of evil leads to the destruction of freedom itself and its degeneration into an evil necessity. On the other hand, the denial of the freedom of evil in favour of an exclusive freedom of good ends equally in a negation of freedom and its degeneration—into good necessity. But a good necessity is not good, because goodness resides in freedom from necessity." Berdyaev outlines a history of how this dialectic played out historically (Augustine versus Pelagianism, disputes over

[43] Ibid.: 63–65.

[44] Ibid.: 66.

[45] Ibid.: 68–69.

Jansenism, Lutheranism, Calvinism) and then sums up: "The spectres of a bad liberty and a good compulsion have dogged the steps of Christian thinkers and freedom has suffered, sometimes through the evil found in it, sometimes by way of enforced goodness." No doubt thinking of "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor," Berdyaev adds, "The fires of the Inquisition were the horrifying evidence of this tragedy of freedom and the difficulty found in its resolution even by a conscience enlightened by the light of Christ." Berdyaev and Dostoevsky say together, "There is truth about freedom as well as freedom in truth, and the answer to its everlasting problem should be sought in the fact that Christ is not only the Truth, but *the truth about freedom*, unconstrained truth, that he is himself freedom and unconstrained love."[46]

Berdyaev claims that "it is in *The Brothers Karamazov* that Dostoevsky finally and definitively shows that freedom in so far as it is self-will and self-affirmation must end in a negation of God, of man and of the world, and of freedom itself." The conclusion of Dostoevsky's dialectic is that developing freedom can cancel itself out, "compulsion and an evil necessity are lying in wait for it. The doctrines of the Grand Inquisitor . . . are born of self-will and godlessness; freedom becomes self-will, self-will becomes compulsion. That is the process. It is the self-willed who deny the freedom of a religious conscience and of the human spirit."[47] Berdyaev constantly reminds us that Dostoevsky's "treatment of freedom is dynamic . . . continually borne along on a dialectical movement, displaying internal contradictions and passing through successive phases." This "dialectic of freedom reaches its climax in the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, in which all problems are concentrated and all their threads picked up and joined."[48] Berdyaev writes that "It was given to [Dostoevsky] to reveal the struggle in man between the God-man and the man-god [or superman], between Christ and Antichrist, a conflict unknown to preceding ages when wickedness was seen in only its most elementary and simple forms." Today a human being "no longer rests upon secure foundations, everything . . . is unsteady and contradictory . . . in an atmosphere of illusion and falsehood under a ceaseless threat of *change.* Evil comes forward under an appearance of good, . . . [as] the faces of Christ and of Antichrist, of man become god and of God become man,

[46] Ibid.: 70–71.

[47] Ibid.: 82.

[48] Ibid.: 87–88.

are interchangeable."[49] By the end of his book, however, Berdyaev finds no specific ethical or political instructions from Dostoevsky about how to solve this contemporary problem. As he summarizes in his conclusion: "I have tried to show how strong [Dostoevsky's] enthusiasm for freedom of spirit was, but he did not tell us how it is to be acquired, how we may attain spiritual and moral autonomy, how as individuals and as a people we can emancipate ourselves from base influences." For Dostoevsky, humanity's "only road is through tragedy, inner division, the abyss, the attainment of light through darkness, and his greatness lay in that he showed the light shining in the darkness."[50]

* * *

As we saw in his 1956 markings of Spinka's essay in *Christianity and the Existentialists*, Burke attended to Berdyaev's opposition between man-god and God-man. Even earlier, in a 1945 review of Eric Bentley's *A Century of Hero-Worship*, Burke used Berdyaev's description to correct Bentley's "Heroic Vitalism." Burke writes that "readers of Mr. Bentley's book might well profit by considering, at the same time, the Berdyaev book on Dostoevsky, in which the dialectic of man-god vs. God-man is traced at some length. Conversely, readers of that overly spiritual study would profit greatly by considering, at the same time, *A Century of Hero-Worship*, with its more materialistic, pragmatist, positivist leanings."[51] Burke's reservations about Berdyaev's "overly spiritual study" also explain and are explained by Burke's highlighting of a footnote in Herberg's later commentary on Berdyaev's "personalist socialism" and its anarchistic political implications. Herberg's footnote in *Four Existentialist Theologians* endorses the criticism made by Reinhold Niebuhr: "A part of the claim [made by Berdyaev] of the superiority of Russian spirituality over the West is **derived from the illusion that it is possible to dispense with legal safeguards of both order and freedom so** long as perfect love is achieved. This perfect love is **not ever achieved in man's collective relationships**; and it is a **utopian illusion** to expect such a consummation. . . . The freedom and the community which is implied in the Christian love commandment must **be at least partially secured by law**."[52] But any similar reservations

[49] Ibid.: 60.

[50] Ibid.: 221.

[51] Burke, Kenneth. "Careers Without Careerism." *Kenyon Review* 7 (Winter 1945–46): 162, rpt. in *Equipment for Living*: 497.

[52] Niebuhr, Reinhold. "The Russian Idea." *Religion in Life* 18:2 (Spring 1949): 240; quoted in Herberg, Will. "General Introduction": 15, n. 38.

held by Burke concerning Berdyaev's "overly spiritual study" seem fairly minimal given the positive ways he thought with Berdyaev and Dostoevsky elsewhere.[53]

Having been strongly affected by reading Dostoevsky in his youth, a true "dostoevskyite" in Berdyaev's terms, Burke initially emphasized the psychological content of the novelist's fiction as he developed his own more aesthetic, modernist preoccupations with form as an artist and critic.[54] Later, Burke began thinking more philosophically with Dostoevsky and with others who had done so even more deeply and insistently, such as Berdyaev. Soon after writing the incomplete review and marking up Existentialist books in the fifties, Burke continued such thinking in his *Rhetoric of Religion*, where he logologically reads Augustine's writings and the first three chapters of Genesis. Defending Augustine's preoccupation with the "adolescent perversity" of childhood pear-stealing in Book II of the *Confessions*, Burke employs his dramatistic pentad (or hexad, adding attitude) in remarking that a person who acts "may be ignorant of who he is, what he is doing, what or whom he is acting on, what he is doing it with, or to what end and how he is doing it. Thus, though an agent will usually know more about an act than does anyone else, there is a sense in which new light can be thrown upon the act long after its enactment." He then adds that retrospective insights into "the psychology of the gratuitous crime" have been offered by "French existentialists such as Sartre, and the proto-Existentialist, Dostoevsky" and "another proto-Existentialist, Nietzsche," all three of whom "bring out the ways in which (as with the Superman, or the cult of suicide) a human being attains the technical equivalent of godhead (in being absolute master of one's destiny)."[55]

As he turns logologically to Genesis, Burke works out his most complex word scheme, the "Cycle of Terms Implicit in the Idea of 'Order.'" At the center is "will as locus of possible choice . . . between 'good' and 'evil'" closely aligned with acts of "obedience" and "disobedience" and

[53] Not long after publishing his review of Bentley, Burke shared his interest in Berdyaev with a soon-to-be colleague at Bennington College, the poet Howard Nemerov, to whom he might have sent Berdyaev's *Dostoevsky*. See Nemerov to Burke, 19 December [1948?], Kenneth Burke Papers.

[54] See *The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley, 1915–1981*, ed. Paul Jay. New York: Viking, 1988: 47–48; and *The Long Voyage: Selected Letters of Malcolm Cowley, 1915–1987*, ed. Hans Bak. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014: 223.

[55] Burke, Kenneth. *Rhetoric of Religion*: 96.

their corresponding affirmations—"saying yes to thou-shalt-not"—and negations—"saying no to thou-shalt-not." The logological implications of this cycle lead the agnostic Burke *terminologically* to a place analogous to where the believer Berdyaev arrived *theologically*: Christ, "the second Adam," acts through "patience (sufferance) / repentance / sacrifice" to achieve "redemption by vicarious atonement."[56] Burke himself provides a gloss on the analogy I am noting here between these two thinkers. He writes, "Whereas ontologically or theologically [with Berdyaev] we say that by being endowed with free will man is able to act morally, the corresponding logological statement [for Burke] would be: Implicit in the idea of an act is the idea of free will. (Another version of the formula would be: Implicit in the idea of an act is the idea of freedom.)"[57]

But the analogy here between Berdyaev's and Burke's paths of thought is rather dogmatically loose, given Berdyaev's stance on atonement. In his *Christianity and the Existentialists* notes, Burke had referenced Berdyaev's disagreement with Anselm on the exact nature of Christian salvation by atonement. As Spinka writes, "Berdyaev repudiates the traditional Western views of **Atonement**. He regards the Anselmic theory as a **palpably objectified concept wherein the feudal pattern of justice is transferred to God**." We might say in Burkean fashion that Berdyaev rejects Anselm's analogizing of atonement, of taking juridical terms from the socio-political realm and mistakenly applying them to the supernatural. "Salvation **is not a forensic, judicial process**, but is **a transformation of the very depths of man's nature, a work of divine grace**, in which the initiative is taken by God. For 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself' (2 Cor. 5:19)."[58] Burke cross-references these passages to two others, writing in the margin: "salvation 64 (Anselm) (see 70)." The cross-referenced passages on those pages include: "the ancient Eastern Orthodox concept of **salvation as transformation of the human into the divine-human personality**" and "**Victory over evil takes place in the depths of the human personality by the transformation** of the **basic drives of the person**, wrought by divine grace and results in the winning of man back to communion with God."[59] Burke's logology in the *Rhetoric of*

[56] Ibid.: 184.

[57] Ibid.: 187. (The bracketed insertions are my additions not Burke's.) For further thinking about freedom but in dialogue form, see Burke's "Prologue in Heaven" concluding *The Rhetoric of Religion*: 280–84, 294.

[58] Spinka, Matthew. "Nicholas Berdyaev": 69.

[59] Ibid.: 64, 70.

Religion works with the more traditional concepts of Anselmic atonement that Berdyaev rejected.[60]

In any case, Burke's highlighting and copying the name of *Anselm* is not surprising. Anselm of Canterbury was one of Burke's favorite theologians. To give just one significant example of Burke thinking with him: Burke analogically uses Anselm (blended with Augustine) to explain one of the most important claims of his logology. In "Terministic Screens" Burke asserts that vocabularies reflect, select, and deflect reality for human beings. Observations are filtered through these terministic screens. Indeed, many so-called "observations" are just "implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made." Burke explains by citing the Anselmic-Augustinian dictum that humans must believe in order to understand:

> I have in mind the injunction, at once pious and methodological, "Believe, that you may understand (*crede, ut intelligas*)." . . . The "logological," or "terministic" counterpart of "Believe" in the formula would be: *Pick some particular nomenclature, some one terministic screen*. And for "That you may understand," the counterpart would be: "*That you may proceed to track down the kinds of observation implicit in the terminology you have chosen, whether your choice of terms was deliberate or spontaneous*."

Thus, for Burke, the theological injunction, "Believe, that you may understand," can be applied to the "purely secular problem" of terministic screens.[61] This is still another illustration of how Burke reads theology, words about God, to get insights for his logology, words about words.

I have tried to demonstrate throughout this essay how Burke does the same analogic thinking with the philosophy of Christian Existentialism, using his scattered jottings on Berdyaev as a prime example. In his thinking with Berdyaev, Burke agrees with the Russian theo-philosopher on the importance of freedom. Indeed, the act of freedom, dramatized in

[60] Not that Burke's thinking about the dialectic of Christian atonement was in any way simple or traditional. See Burke, Kenneth. *Grammar of Motives*: 407; and Burke, Kenneth. *Rhetoric of Religion*: 181, 191, 270.

[61] Burke, Kenneth. "Terministic Screens." *Language as Symbolic Action*: 46–47. Burke is here conflating Anselm and Augustine in developing something like his own version of a rhetorical-hermeneutic circle. See Mailloux, Steven. "Political Theologies of Sacred Rhetoric." *Responding to the Sacred: An Inquiry into the Limits of Rhetoric*, ed. Michael Bernard-Donals and Kyle Jensen. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021: 80.

Dostoevsky and described by Berdyaev, forms the very center of Burke's theory of symbolic action, his Dramatism and ultimately his Logology. Freedom is the condition of possibility for human action as opposed to mere motion, and *free will* is the necessary product of the cycle of terms implicit in the idea of hierarchical order presented in Burke's *Rhetoric of Religion*. To paraphrase Burke's famous "Definition of Man": Human beings are symbol-using and misusing animals, creative inventors of the negative, separated from their natural conditions by the free use of instruments of their own making, and goaded by the spirit of hierarchy in which they perform their ultimately free actions.[62]

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[62] See Burke, Kenneth. *Rhetoric of Religion*: 40; and Burke, Kenneth. "Definition of Man." *Language as Symbolic Action*: 3–24.

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